

November 28, 2016

The Importance Of Church Discipline (Part 6)

Matthew 18:17, **“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...”**

The modern evangelical church by and large is straining under the collective weight of members who continue in sinful lifestyles. The consequences of this are highly destructive and divisive to the church, often having an adverse effect on other believers and dividing entire congregations. It is therefore the task of all Christ-followers to protect the church they belong to from the rot of sin that is not being confronted by following Christ's pattern for church discipline that we find here in Matthew 18:15-20.

In Matthew 18:15 we are given the first step in the process, **“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained a brother.”** The first step then is a one on one confrontation between you and the sinning member. If there is no repentance, then the next step is found in verse 16, **“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.”** The second step then is to take one or two witnesses along with you as you confront the sinning brother or sister. If the sinner still refuses to repent of their sin then our Lord's instructions are very clear: Verse 17, **“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.”**

Most of us do not like confrontation. Therefore it is easy to think of a thousand reasons for not following this command. Things like: it's harsh, I might offend someone, it's embarrassing for the person who is being disciplined, it will reflect badly on the church in our community, or what if the person being disciplined takes the church to court? Yes, that has happened before! Most of us think that the discipline process will drive non-believers away from the church and we also think in our privacy obsessed culture that this is best dealt with privately.

But despite all of these excuses and arguments there is one overriding and powerful reason for the church *not* to ignore this very important step in this process: The Lord Jesus Christ commanded us to do it.

Always remember that the primary reason for the church discipline process is to try and win the sinning brother and sister back to the fellowship of believers. This is then the goal of this step as well. The church is to be informed about the person's sin not just for purposes of gossip or so that the person can be ridiculed publicly, but it is so that the church will be enlisted as a whole to help in appealing to the sinning brother or sister.

So once again we see that the process of church discipline is the responsibility and duty of the entire church. This is not to be delegated to just one person like the pastor. In fact I can tell you

from personal experience there are very few things that are more discouraging to a pastor than when they feel as if they are the only ones who care about a person's sin. This is a corporate duty. This approach also has the added benefit of protecting the church from the abuse of power. In 3 John 9-10 the apostle John described just this issue: **“I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come. I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.”**

Apparently Diotrephes was abusing his power and his influence as a leader in the church and he was doing so as to turn people from the church and was even excommunicating some on his own. This problem can become all too real in churches today where the pastor has far too much authority to fire elders and deacons and to remove members that he doesn't like. Church discipline was never meant to be *nor* should it be the task of one man. Church discipline is to be a corporate process and a corporate responsibility. This is why before anyone is removed from a church; the entire church body must be brought into the process. Only after the whole body of Christ has had the opportunity to try and restore the sinning brother or sister will they then be put out of the church.

The reason that this is a corporate duty and responsibility is because the entire church is affected by the sin of the offending party. After all of this, if the sinning brother or sister repents, it is then the duty of the entire congregation to reaffirm to them their love and forgiveness for them. Paul gave exactly those instructions in 2 Corinthians 2:5-8: **“Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure – not to put it too severely – to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.”**

Unfortunately and tragically there are times when the sinning brother or sister still refuses to repent even after these three stages of church discipline have been followed. Fortunately the Lord has provided us with a fourth step which we will look at the next time.